

Search and Rescue: Preparing for the Unthinkable

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FORT BELVOIR, Va. -- America's search and rescue capability is like having life insurance -- most service members don't pay attention to it until they need it, Army Gen. Henry H. Shelton said Oct. 27 at DoD's third annual personnel recovery conference here.

"I think that most people probably have the attitude, 'It can't happen to me,'" the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff said at the second of three days of meetings. "That's a good attitude to have when you are in the heat of battle." But, he said, warfighters must train and think hard about what needs to be fixed so they know what to do and are properly equipped and trained when the unthinkable happens.

The chairman said things get exciting quickly when an airplane goes down and everybody is scrambling to rescue the crew as quickly as possible. While no other country in the world is better at search and rescue than the United States, there's still room for improvement, Shelton noted.

"We want to build on the two previous conferences and find better ways to do things, from equipment to training," he said. The conference here focused on information briefings, panel discussions and workshops. Panel discussions included recovery operations during Operation Allied Force, intelligence support to personnel recovery and acquisition and technology support for personnel recovery.

On Oct. 1, DoD established the Joint Forces Command as the single source for personnel recovery and merged the Joint Personnel Recovery Agency; Joint Services Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape Agency; Joint Combat Search and Rescue Agency; and Joint Combat Search and Rescue Test and Evaluation Center.

The chairman said the Defense Prisoner of War/Missing Personnel Office is also in the process of conducting several studies on personnel recovery.

"Through these investigations, we hope to identify areas of concern and requirements for the future," Shelton said.

Maintaining America's outstanding capability in personnel recovery costs a lot in terms of people, equipment, time and training, "but it's worth every cent," he said.

"You can't put a price on someone's life," the chairman emphasized. "And in our armed forces we are committed to doing everything we can to bring our people home. This commitment is rooted in our values as Americans and in the bonds forged between those under fire."

Shelton said soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines fight, and sometimes die, not only for their flag or the Constitution, but, in the final analysis, for their buddies.

"Part of this bond among warriors is the promise not to leave a comrade behind on the battlefield," he said. "A promise that extends to a shipmate at sea and a wingman who gets hit deep behind enemy lines."

Shelton said, he saw the promise fulfilled many times during two tours in Vietnam as men performed heroically for their buddies.

"I saw men carry the wounded to safety under withering fire," he noted. "I also saw men work tirelessly to recover their fellow soldiers who had been killed in action, risking their lives to retrieve a fallen comrade without regard to whether he was alive or not."

The nation's efforts to return the three soldiers captured by Serbians and the successful rescues of downed pilots during Operation Allied Force are the latest in a long history that confirms this commitment, Shelton said.

He cited the rescue of the first downed F-117 pilot as an example of the difficult task and team work it takes to perform a rescue from hostile territory. Shelton emphasized the importance of having the right equipment along with prior preparation and training.

Rescuing a downed service member denies the enemy both information about U.S. forces and a political bargaining chip, he said. "Simply put, if we can get them first, they can't be exploited," Shelton said.

"Personnel recovery has another practical aspect -- it's the right thing to do," he said. "It's good for morale. By pledging to put every effort into recovering our highly trained soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines, we send a powerful signal about their importance and help sustain their spirit under the stress of combat."

Shelton said several important issues face the recovery community today, including problems with radios, communications and training.

"While individual training is generally good, there are problems in getting realistic training for staff organizations and the rescue task forces," he noted. "As a result, we do a lot of 'on the job training' during the opening days of a conflict, such as in Operation Allied Force and during the rescue operation."

Shelton gave the conferees two missions: Probe problems in personnel recovery and become more aware of the challenges involved, and help chart the path to the future by raising concerns now.